

## **Schools, governors and disadvantage**

*Charlotte Dean, Alan Dyson, Frances Gallannaugh, Andy Howes and Carlo Raffo*

**This report explores the challenges faced by the governing bodies of schools which serve disadvantaged areas.**

There are some 350,000 places on school governing bodies in England. Governors are charged with ensuring that local stakeholders have a voice in how schools are run, and in many places do so effectively. However, this study focused on areas of disadvantage, where the challenges are often severe. It found that governing bodies often lack the capacity to be effective and face confusion about the real purpose of their work. The report suggests that successive waves of school reform have taken place without real consideration of the implications for governance. It therefore proposes options for the reform of governance and argues that a national debate on this issue is needed, linked to questions about the nature of democracy in disadvantaged areas.

The report will be of interest to school governors, head teachers, local and national decision makers in education, and anyone concerned with local democracy in the governance of public services.



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The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policymakers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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First published 2007 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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ISBN: 978 1 85935 557 2

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

Prepared by:  
York Publishing Services Ltd  
64 Hallfield Road  
Layerthorpe  
York YO31 7ZQ  
Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; Website: [www.yps-publishing.co.uk](http://www.yps-publishing.co.uk)

Further copies of this report, or any other JRF publication, can be obtained from the JRF website ([www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/](http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/)).

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# Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the governors, head teachers, local authority officers and other interviewees who generously gave their time to this study. We would also like to thank Dr Margaret Arnott, Glasgow Caledonian University, Professor Tony Gallagher, Queen's University Belfast and Professor Sally Power, Cardiff University, who commented on drafts of our findings. In particular, we would like to thank Charlie Lloyd, project manager at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and members of our advisory group – Nigel Burke, Government Office for the North West; Professor Peter Earley, University of London Institute of Education; Teresa Harper, DfES; Colin Humphreys, Ofsted; and Gale Waller, Audit Commission – for their invaluable critical friendship. Needless to say, the views expressed in the report, and any errors or shortcomings it may contain, are entirely the responsibility of the research team.

# Executive summary

- 1 This report presents the findings of linked case studies of the school governing bodies in three contrasting areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage. The case studies involved interviews with governors, head teachers, local authority officers and other stakeholders, together with the detailed exploration of 'critical incidents' that threw light on how the role of governors was understood, constrained and facilitated.
- 2 School governing bodies undertake a complex series of roles that focus on monitoring, challenging and supporting the staff – and especially the head teachers – of their schools. Their importance has increased over the last two decades as the direct control of local authorities has decreased, though governing bodies have also to comply with powerful national imperatives. Many governing bodies face challenges in terms of recruiting members with appropriate expertise and striking the right balances in their roles so that they are of maximum usefulness to their schools. These challenges are particularly acute in disadvantaged areas, where schools are likely to face significant pressures.
- 3 The problems and possibilities of school governance cannot be divorced from a wider set of issues around governance in disadvantaged areas. These centre on the perceived disengagement of large numbers of people from traditional political processes and the quest for new forms of democratic participation. In principle, governing bodies offer a promising vehicle for such participation. However, the challenges they face in such areas are exacerbated by the lack of any clear and consensual rationale for their existence. Different potential rationales can be identified in terms of the managerial, localising and democratising contribution that governors might make, but each of these assumes different characteristics on the part of governors, different forms of legitimacy and different definitions of service quality.
- 4 Although the membership of governing bodies in the areas where this study was located was diverse, it was also skewed towards women, older people, and people from majority ethnic and professional backgrounds. This skewing was even more evident among the limited numbers of governors who were most active. By and large, the representation of sectional interests was viewed with distrust by governors and attempts were made to manage out such representation. Instead, governors saw themselves as working on behalf of the interests of the school as a whole, defined particularly as the interests of the children in the school.



- 5 Although government guidance expects governors to act as critical friends to head teachers and as strategic leaders of their schools, the reality is more complex than this. By and large, the governors in our study felt happier offering support rather than challenge, and relied on heads to set a strategic direction for the school. They also found it difficult to articulate any clear and detailed vision of 'service quality' on which to base their leadership. However, they did have a strong and principled sense of acting in the interests of the school and of the children within it. They were, therefore, prepared to battle external threats to these interests and their support for head teachers was conditional on the head, too, acting in this common interest.
- 6 Governors in our study were not entirely free to define their roles as they wished. They were significantly constrained by limitations in their capacity for dealing with the complex tasks they are required to undertake and by the policy frameworks within which they are required to operate. It appeared that national initiatives and the work of proactive chairs, heads and local authorities can go some way towards ameliorating these problems, but, since the constraints are structural, they cannot entirely overcome them.
- 7 The picture that emerges from the study suggests that the state of governance in schools serving disadvantaged areas is decidedly mixed. Governing bodies can make a valuable contribution to schools if they have an adequate supply of governors with time, commitment and expertise. However, those circumstances are difficult to create. Moreover, the lack of consensus about the rationale for governing bodies creates a confused situation in which competing rationales tend to undermine one another.
- 8 In this situation, there are three options for change. One is to extend current local and national initiatives aimed at addressing some of the specific challenges facing governing bodies and hence bring about *incremental* change in the state of governance. Another is to address the *structural* problems of governing bodies by, for instance, replacing them with other forms of monitoring and accountability, or moving away from the idea of having one governing body for each school. A third option is more *radical* in that it would involve taking seriously the democratic role of governing bodies and exploring ways of enabling the voices of local people to be heard more fully within them, and local control of schools to be exercised through them, more effectively than at present.
- 9 Despite the problems with school governance, ongoing reforms of the school system mean that the current situation is fluid, while evidence from elsewhere (including other parts of the UK) suggests that alternative forms of governance

are possible. There is, therefore, an opportunity to rethink school governance as part of a wider debate on the governance of public services and the nature of democracy in disadvantaged areas.

# 1 Governing schools in disadvantaged areas

## The study

In recent years, schools have become increasingly independent of local authorities. Indeed, the Government has recently declared the aim of the next stage of education reform to be:

... the creation of a system of independent non-fee paying state schools.  
(HM Government, 2005, p. 4)

This aim throws issues to do with the governance of schools into sharp relief. On the one hand, schools that are in any real sense independent clearly cannot be micro-managed either by Whitehall or by their local town halls. On the other hand, there is a legitimate public interest in what schools do, and this seems to demand some form of governance beyond the national framework of legislation, regulation and inspection. Traditionally, this governance has been provided by an army of unpaid volunteers – potentially 350,000 strong according to recent estimates (DfES, 2004) – who make up the governing bodies of the country's 23,000 state schools.

This represents a massive investment of what we might call civic capital. In purely financial terms, if governors were to be paid the going rate for their work, the annual charge on the public purse would run into many millions of pounds. Perhaps more important, if, as governments insist, schooling is the key to the life chances of individuals and the economic development of the country as a whole, then the quality of governance is crucial. Only at the school level can the work of heads and their staff be scrutinised and supported. Only there can successive waves of education reform be made to work in detail. Above all, only there can ordinary citizens have an effective voice in the way this most important service is run.

There is every reason to believe that, in many areas, governing bodies do indeed make a valuable contribution to their schools. However, this may not be the case everywhere. In areas of socio-economic disadvantage, for instance, schools are under enormous pressure, both because their role in overcoming disadvantage is crucial and because the challenges they face are almost overwhelming. Yet it is in precisely such areas that the model of volunteer citizens supporting and challenging the work of professionals seems most problematic. Where are these volunteers to come from, given the pressures under which people in such areas find themselves?

If they are to be found, how are they to acquire the expertise necessary to form an effective partnership with highly trained professionals? And, even if these conditions can somehow be met, what are they to do about the acute problems of schooling in such areas – problems that have frustrated the best efforts of local and central government for generations?

It is with challenges such as these in mind that our study was undertaken. We wished to understand better the state of governance in disadvantaged areas and to explore what might be done to capitalise on its successes and overcome its weaknesses. Our work, in the first instance, was focused around three broad questions.

- Whose interests do governing bodies represent?
- What influence do governing bodies have?
- What is the relationship between the actions of the governing body and the quality of service provided by the school?

However, we found ourselves ranging widely across issues to do with the role of governing bodies, the nature of governance in disadvantaged areas and, ultimately, the relationship between the governance of public services and the type of democracy in which we live.

In the remainder of this chapter, we review the background to the study, describe the role of school governors and begin to outline some of the issues that we found ourselves addressing. In the next chapter, we describe the areas where the study was located and briefly explain our methodology. In the central chapters of the report, we illustrate the main themes to have emerged from our research before, in the final chapter, considering their implications.

### **What do governors do?**

The English education system has developed a complex pattern of governance for its state schools. There is a sometimes bewildering array of school types – independent schools, community schools, foundation schools, voluntary aided schools, voluntary controlled schools, city technology colleges, academies and trust schools – each of which has its own distinctive governance arrangements. Moreover, the control of these different schools is divided in different ways between key stakeholders in the system. All schools work within a framework of national policy and regulation, and the majority work in one way or another within a framework of local authority

policy. In recent years (effectively since the 1988 Education Reform Act), the degree of direct control from central government has increased, at least for state schools, while the degree of local authority control has declined. The majority of schools, therefore, have gained a high level of independence of action, but only within a highly prescriptive framework of national regulation.

In this context, the nature of governance in state schools has changed significantly. Such schools have long been required to have their own governing bodies, made up of local stakeholders, which notionally exercised considerable responsibility for school policy. In practice, however, real control tended to lie with the local authority, and governors for the most part contented themselves with exercising discretion only in relatively trivial matters. However, as the influence of local authorities has declined, governors have begun to take far more decisions for themselves and now exercise more meaningful control over their schools. They have 'general responsibility for the conduct of the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement' (Education Act 2002, section 21). They are required to provide the school with a strategic direction, offer support and challenge to its staff, and act as the 'critical friends' of the head teacher. Specifically, they have a range of duties and powers including, among many others, setting targets for pupil achievement, managing the school's finances, making sure the curriculum is balanced and broadly based, appointing staff, and reviewing staff performance and pay. They are expected to set school improvement targets, agree a performance management policy and review the performance of the head teacher. They have to report annually to parents and also have responsibility for plans that are drawn up in response to formal inspections of the school (DfES, 2006).

Different governing bodies work in different ways to carry out these tasks. In general terms, head teachers manage the school on a day-to-day basis, while the governing body focuses on strategic direction, policy and performance. Typically, it will exercise these responsibilities by meeting from time to time as a full governing body, by creating a number of committees to handle particular issues and by working more directly with members of the school staff. In this last respect, the relationship between the head teacher and the chair of governors can be particularly important, and it is common for them to meet frequently to discuss ongoing issues.

### **Governors and service quality**

The requirement on governing bodies to 'promote high standards of educational achievement' is particularly important for understanding the nature of their role in recent times. Successive governments have staked their reputations on their

ability to improve the quality of public services, especially in relation to the school system. With this in mind, they have engaged in 'an unprecedented crusade to raise standards' (Blair, 1999) – standards that have been defined largely in terms of the attainments of children measured on national assessments. Since these assessments have been aggregated at the level of the school and combined with a wider portfolio of school performance measures – levels of attendance, numbers of exclusions, reports from formal inspections – it is the individual school that has become the delivery unit for the so-called standards agenda. The corollary is that schools have also become the unit at which accountability for standards is most powerfully enforced.

The implication of this is that quality in schooling has, in practice, come to be defined in terms of ever-improving standards of student attainment and school performance. Governing bodies have little scope for developing alternative models of quality, or (even if they should want to do such a thing) for taking their schools in radical directions where standards of attainment are regarded as of secondary importance.

To some extent, it is also true that governing bodies have only limited flexibility in how they deliver many aspects of the standards agenda. In the context of an inspection regime that is based on a clear model of what counts as 'good' practice, national strategies that set out how particular subjects will be taught and funding streams that often come with detailed accountability requirements, there is a real sense in which governors and their head teachers have to do as they are told by central government. On the other hand, even this high level of central prescription leaves many areas of operational detail where governors are free to use their discretion. Moreover, governments have encouraged governing bodies to pursue an individually distinctive path for their school, for instance by developing a specialism, or defining a distinctive ethos, or changing the formal status of the school.

There comes a point, of course, where governors' control over such matters effectively becomes control over more fundamental purposes, and hence over definitions of quality. To take a particular example, at the same time as schools are expected to drive up standards of attainment, they are being encouraged to deliver a range of services to children, families and local communities under the aegis of the 'extended schools' programme (DfES, 2005). This requires governing bodies to assess the service needs that exist locally, to develop partnerships with non-educational organisations and to develop their own forms of provision for meeting those needs. In practice, this is giving rise to some distinctive local models of how schools should operate and, more importantly, what count as good services for a particular locality (Cummings *et al.*, 2005).

## Who are the governors?

School governors are drawn from a number of stakeholder constituencies. Typically, these include parents, members of the teaching and support staff, governors appointed by the local authority and governors drawn from the local community. The many schools that are founded and maintained by bodies other than local authorities – for instance, faith schools and academies – have governors representing these bodies. Some schools will have governors who have made some financial contribution to the school, or will appoint associate members who are not full governors, but who attend meetings and contribute their particular experience and skills.

Governing bodies are thus diverse in their composition. Although they are drawn from a number of constituencies, individual governors are, by and large, not formally representative of any group. Only parent and staff governors are elected, and there is no guarantee that these elections will be contested. Other governors are appointed, and even then by a diversity of bodies – the local authority, the school's founding body or the governing body itself. Moreover, governing bodies are not usually highly politicised. Local councillors can and do serve as governors but are highly unlikely to be in the majority. Local political issues – whether or not in the party political sense – similarly can and do impact on governing bodies, but for the most part governors are preoccupied with the minutiae of running their schools and tend to operate by consensus. The formalised oppositional politics of local and national government are currently more or less absent from their proceedings.

## The problems and challenges of governance

Despite the relatively cosy impression of governing bodies that this may present, all is not well in the world of governance. There is a small but important body of research literature that points to a series of problems (see, for instance, Deem *et al.*, 1995; Earley, 1994, 2003; Earley and Creese, 2003; Levacic, 1995; Ranson *et al.*, 2005; Saran and Taylor, 1999; Shearn *et al.*, 1995). Three problems in particular emerge from these studies.

- *The balance between challenge and support.* In principle, governing bodies should be able to hold head teachers to account in a way that helps to improve the performance of the school. In practice, this is not always the case. Occasionally, governing bodies, or sections thereof, end up in unproductive, adversarial relationships with their heads. More commonly, governors feel ill-



equipped to challenge the professional judgement of head teachers. Despite efforts to improve information flows to governors, heads are able to control something of what governors get to know and much of how they interpret whatever information they receive. Moreover, many governors are uncomfortable with the idea of holding heads to account and prefer to see themselves as advisers and supporters.

- *The balance between strategy and management.* In principle, governors are responsible for the strategic oversight of the school, leaving day-to-day management to head teachers. In practice, they may be drawn into day-to-day issues, or feel unable to chart a strategic direction without the detailed professional knowledge to which heads have access. By the same token, since heads control day-to-day decision making in the school, it is relatively easy for them to extend their influence into areas that perhaps should be negotiated with, or left entirely to, governing bodies.
- *The recruitment of governors.* Some governing bodies have few problems in filling their vacancies with people who have appropriate skills and knowledge. However, this is not the case everywhere. Some schools, for instance, find it difficult to identify parents willing to serve as governors, or have to fill vacancies with governors who feel ill-equipped to make a full contribution. In practice, a small core of governors may carry most of the burden, while other governors play a more marginal role. Where governors can be recruited, they may not necessarily reflect the characteristics of local communities. There may be a bias in recruitment towards white, middle-aged and middle-class governors, perhaps with a public service background. Minority and marginalised groups in local communities may be under-represented and/or may play little part in the most influential aspects of the governing body's work.

## The challenges of disadvantaged areas

In many ways, the governance of schools serving disadvantaged areas presents challenges that are similar to those facing schools everywhere, but in heightened form. Such schools tend to find themselves under greater pressure than their counterparts elsewhere. To some extent, this pressure comes from the distinctive social, economic and educational issues in such areas – issues that manifest themselves in schools most obviously through low levels of attainment, and potentially high levels of special educational needs, student absence, student mobility and disciplinary problems. It also comes from an education marketplace in which the reputation of a school locally influences the number of families wishing to



send their children to the school, and hence the financial and educational viability of the school. It is, moreover, the result of an accountability system which holds governing bodies responsible for school performance and which, as we have seen, tends to equate the performance of the school with the attainments of its students. It is not for nothing that the DfES (Department for Education and Skills) has created a category of 'schools facing challenging circumstances', defined as schools with chronically low student attainment, invariably serving areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage.

In many ways, therefore, governance of such schools is a high-stakes affair, with the ever-present possibility of problems spinning out of control and consequent high-profile failure. Not surprisingly, schools serving disadvantaged areas are likely to attract relatively high levels of government and local authority attention. This might mean access to targeted initiatives and funding – though these may add to the complexity of the issues of which the governing body has oversight. It might also mean constant reporting to and intervention from local authority officers, Ofsted inspectors, and the local and national managers of these same initiatives.

At the same time as governance is more demanding, so the problems associated with the recruitment, expertise and representativeness of governors seem likely to be more acute. If schools serving disadvantaged areas have a generally low-attaining student population, they may also have a parent body where few people have a professional background or feel inclined to become involved in the technicalities of governance. There may, moreover, be few professional people living locally and few businesses or other organisations to which they can look as a source of volunteers. As a result, the governing body may be depleted in numbers and/or expertise, or may have to look beyond its immediate area to recruit. The School Governors' One Stop Shop (<http://www.sgoss.org.uk/>), for instance – a sort of 'dating agency' that matches volunteers to vacancies on governing bodies – was established precisely in order to widen the recruitment of skilled governors for schools in disadvantaged areas. However, this means that the composition of governing bodies may be significantly different from the composition of local communities, with an increased prospect that socially marginalised groups may also be marginalised within the governance of schools.

### **Governance, communities and democracy**

This is, of course, part of a wider problem of public service governance in such areas. Although recent governments have been highly active in driving up the quality of public services, it is clear that Whitehall cannot become involved in

micro-management. Traditionally, local councils have had a key role to play as intermediaries between central government and local communities, taking central imperatives and shaping them to local needs. However, there is a growing concern among policy makers that local democratic processes no longer seem relevant to many people – particularly in disadvantaged areas and among marginalised groups. The Government's response to this has been to pursue what has come to be known as the 'new localism' agenda (Aspden and Birch, 2005). Essentially, this means involving people in decisions that affect them and their neighbourhood through a process of 'double devolution' (Miliband, 2006) whereby Whitehall devolves decision making to local government, and local government in turn devolves decision making to local groups and structures.

The rationale for new localism is captured by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, which has led on much of this work:

At the heart of the government's current thinking for neighbourhood renewal is the principle that local people know best what the priorities and needs of their own neighbourhoods are and that they must have the opportunity and the tools to participate in its regeneration.  
(Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2006)

However, the implications of the new localism agenda go well beyond the essentially pragmatic consideration of who knows best what is needed in particular places. They are also to do with lending legitimacy to public services, with developing new forms of active and engaged citizenship, and, ultimately, with developing new sets of relationships between the State and the citizen – not least, those citizens who currently feel themselves excluded from traditional political processes (see, for instance, Gaventa, 2004).

The new localism agenda, and, particularly, the idea of double devolution, create some interesting possibilities and dilemmas for school governing bodies. In one sense, they are prime examples of the sorts of participatory structures that new localism seeks to foster. By providing forums in which local stakeholders can shape local services, they offer an important alternative to more centralised control at the level either of a distant town hall or an even more distant Whitehall. However, double devolution is not simply about bypassing local authorities. On the contrary, the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government (Lyons, 2006) has proposed what it calls a 'place-shaping' role in which local councils work with local people to develop local identity, act as the voice of local communities, and ensure that services promote the well-being of the area and the people who live there. This places school governing bodies in a somewhat ambiguous position. On the one hand, they are responsible for

delivering services at the very local level and may well include many local residents and service users among their membership. They therefore have to have the freedom to shape the service they offer to the local situation as they see it. On the other hand, they operate within a framework created by the local council, which is being encouraged to see itself as the voice of local communities, and which may well wish schools to fall in with its own strategies and plans.

This is nowhere more evident than in the Every Child Matters reforms (DfES, 2003), aimed at developing integrated children and families' services at local level. Local authorities are busily reconfiguring their own provision and working with a range of partners to develop seamless services and to promote a range of outcomes for children that include, but go well beyond, educational attainment. Schools are potentially key partners in these reforms through their direct work with children, through their contribution to local strategies and through their capacity to act as hubs for local service delivery. It follows that governing bodies, far from being free to take their schools in whatever direction they see fit, are likely to be asked to host a range of non-educational provision on the school site and/or to align their schools with local strategies that are as much to do with health, or community safety, or area regeneration as they are with the school's core business of educational standards.

The whole situation is complicated yet further by the development, under successive governments, of a market in school places as a means of driving up standards of service provision. Put simply, families can, within certain constraints, choose to send their child to any school that has a place available. Schools are then funded in accordance with the number of students they are able to attract. In principle, this means that individual families become active consumers of schooling, choosing between a range of alternatives rather than passively accepting standardised provision. At the same time, the market acts to shape the service to people's wishes by creating a strong incentive for schools to offer whatever it is that local people seem to want.

However, the fact that the schools market works through processes of *individual* family choice may actually serve to disconnect schools from local communities. There is no reason why families should choose schools in their immediate locality if they think something better is on offer elsewhere. By the same token, there is no reason why governing bodies should set out to recruit students only from the immediate locality. This is particularly the case in disadvantaged areas where governors may fear that the difficulties experienced by some local students will reflect badly on the reputation of the school and make it unpopular, even in the community it seeks to serve. Instead, governors may prefer to broaden their geographical appeal and recruit more 'problem-free' students from elsewhere. In the circumstances, it is

hardly surprising that a recent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) study has found that there is only a loose relationship between the geographical area within which a school is situated and the areas from which it draws its students (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2006).

This trend towards non-local recruitment is strengthened by national policy efforts to diversify the range of school types as a means of increasing the choices available to families. Rather than choosing from neighbouring schools of the same type, families may well opt to choose a school some distance away that is the only one of its type in the area. Faith schools, for instance, have long recruited from well beyond their immediate locality. Other schools have 'specialist' status and may seek to recruit students from a wide area who have a particular aptitude for the subject in which the school specialises. In these cases, it may be less important for the governing body to reflect the views of 'local' people than for it to understand the motivations of the types of families it is trying to attract, or simply to have the skills and expertise to develop a distinctive type of school. So, for instance, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 envisages the creation of 'trust schools' by linking schools with external partners who can nominate the majority of the governing body. It may be that some of these partners – local businesses, say, or housing providers – will be based in the immediate locality served by the school, and will have some understanding of local conditions and local people. However, this is by no means necessarily the case and they may well be large organisations – universities, for instance, or multinational corporations – with a regional, national or international remit. The governors such partners nominate, therefore, may know much more about high-level management than they do about local communities.

All of this creates tricky cross-currents for governing bodies to negotiate. It is far from clear whether governors are working on behalf of people in the immediate locality, or of the families who choose to send their children to the school, regardless of where they live, or of some more extensive, authority-wide local interest. It is unclear who governors represent, on whose behalf they speak and how their mandate relates to that of the local authority. Finally, it is unclear whether their priorities should lie in protecting the school's position in a competitive market, or promoting the overall well-being of students and their families, or contributing to overarching strategies for local development.

## Alternative models of governance

In this confused situation, it is important to remember that governing bodies are very much an English phenomenon. In many other countries, the need for governance at the individual school level is obviated by the direct election of school boards or municipal administrations, responsible for all schools in a given area. Even in other parts of the UK, where the organisation of schooling is broadly similar to that in England, governance is different in style or structure. For instance, the churches are major players in school governance in Northern Ireland, and the existence of a selective grammar school system means that the notion of the community served by a school is necessarily different from that in most parts of England. In Wales, the structures of governance are similar to those in England, but competition between schools, and the separation between schools and local authorities, are probably less marked. In Scotland, there are increasing structural differences in governance. The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 is replacing school-level boards (similar to, but not identical with, English governing bodies) with parent councils, directly elected by the parent body as a whole.

Put simply, governing bodies as they currently exist in England are not the only means of governing schools. They are products of a particular educational history, and, in recent years especially, have been adapted to meet rapid developments in the educational landscape as a whole. There is, therefore, no inevitability in their continued existence in their current form – or, indeed, in their continued existence in any form.

## What are governing bodies for?

All of this points to an underlying question about governing bodies. What, precisely, are they for? Is there anything that would be lost if governing bodies did not exist – if, say, schools were administered directly by local authorities, or if they operated like private contractors within a framework of nationally defined standards, or if the ‘critical friends’ of head teachers were personnel from a government agency set up for the purpose?

One of the problems facing governing bodies, and those, like ourselves, who wish to understand or evaluate their work, is that it is difficult to identify a single answer to this question. Looking at the tasks that governors are asked to perform and the debates that have arisen recently around governance more generally, we can identify at least three different types of rationale that might be offered for their continued

existence. We call them here a 'managerial' rationale, a 'localising' rationale and a 'democratising' rationale. It may be that these rationales are mutually compatible. However, it strikes us that each of them implies a different form of legitimacy for the governing body, demands a different set of skills and knowledge on the part of governors, and implies a somewhat different definition of service quality.

### ***Managerial***

In introducing new guidance for governing bodies, Derek Twigg, then the relevant junior minister, characterised their role in the following terms:

The role of the governing body has changed beyond recognition over the past twenty years. With the introduction of local management of schools and further reforms, governing bodies have become the strategic leaders of schools. They are rightly responsible and accountable in law and in practice for major decisions about the school and its future. Governing bodies are equal partners in leadership with the head teacher and senior management team. We want to see them taking a full part in driving the improvement and culture of the school.  
(DfES, 2004, p. 2)

While the guidance goes on to differentiate between the role of the head teacher in the day-to-day-running of the school and the more strategic responsibilities of governors, what we have here is an essentially managerialist rationale for the existence of governing bodies. In other words, their role is to make sure that the school is managed as efficiently and effectively as possible by overseeing the professionals who undertake the detailed work.

The implication is that, while governors may not need the same level of educational skills and knowledge as professionals, they do need to know enough about schools and management to exercise effective oversight. As the guidance points out (DfES, 2004, p. 6), schools serving disadvantaged areas may have difficulties recruiting governors 'who can make a difference' in this sense. However, simply being a member of a local community is not enough. Governors derive their legitimacy, not from their local representativeness (indeed, the minister explicitly welcomes moves away from appointing governors with political affiliations), but from their ability to drive up schools' standards of performance. It is through these standards, set nationally by central government, that 'service quality' is ultimately defined.



***Localising***

The localising rationale is implied by that part of the 'new localism' agenda that emphasises the need to shape public services to local circumstances. In education, while central government (and, indeed, local government) can usefully establish policy frameworks, those frameworks have to be interpreted at school level. The role of governing bodies, therefore, is to bring local knowledge to bear on external imperatives and to implement them in the light of 'what works here'. This is particularly important as schools are given increased freedom to develop distinctive approaches within the context of national policy.

The local knowledge of governors is all-important within this rationale and gives governors their legitimacy. However, this is not a representative role and governors do not have to be elected nor, necessarily, to be local residents. It may well be enough for them to be familiar with local conditions, or, more particularly, with the school and its students. As in the managerial rationale, it is not necessary for governing bodies to develop their own distinctive definitions of service quality – though they must be prepared to develop distinctive approaches to the delivery of externally devised purposes and programmes.

***Democratising***

This rationale focuses on that part of the new localism agenda that is concerned with democratic participation and active citizenship. Governing bodies are forums within which local voices can be heard and the wishes of local people can be realised. Rather than simply localising external imperatives, the role of governors in this rationale is to exercise a significant degree of control over the nature of the service on offer to local people. The legitimacy of governors in this venture depends on their representing local people in some authentic way, whether by being formally elected, or by being members of local communities, or by acting as advocates for people. Likewise, 'quality' cannot be equated with external imperatives, even if these are localised so that they 'work' in local circumstances. Rather, local people will want certain things from their school, and governors will have to use this as the basis for definitions of quality that may well differ from place to place.

These rationales are, of course, set out here as 'ideal types'. It may be that, in practice, governors operate without any very clear rationale, or elide one rationale with another. However, setting them out in this way is useful for considering the conflicts and uncertainties that are likely to arise as governors tackle their complex roles. There is, moreover, good reason to suppose that these uncertainties might be

particularly marked in schools serving disadvantaged areas. There, no assumption can be made that the Government's standards agenda is one that meets the needs of all local children or the wishes of local people. Neither can it be assumed, in highly stressed situations, that a small degree of 'localising' by benevolent outsiders will be enough to make national priorities have local meaning. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed either that there are stable communities with politically aware members simply waiting their opportunity to take control of local schools. The issue of what governing bodies are for in such areas is one, therefore, to which we shall return.

### Summary

School governing bodies undertake a complex series of roles that focus on monitoring, challenging and supporting the staff – and especially the head teachers – of their schools. Their importance has increased over the last two decades as the direct control of local authorities has decreased, though governing bodies have also to comply with powerful national imperatives. Many governing bodies face challenges in terms of recruiting members with appropriate expertise and striking the right balances in their roles so that they are of maximum usefulness to their schools. These challenges are particularly acute in schools serving disadvantaged areas, where they are likely to face significant pressures.

The problems and possibilities of school governance cannot be divorced from a wider set of issues around the governance of public services in disadvantaged areas. These centre on the perceived disengagement of large numbers of people from traditional political processes and the quest for new forms of democratic participation. In principle, governing bodies offer a promising vehicle for such participation. However, the challenges of governance in disadvantaged areas are exacerbated by the lack of any clear and consensual rationale for the existence of governing bodies. Different rationales can be identified in terms of the managerial, localising and democratising contribution that governors might make, but each of these assumes different characteristics on the part of governors, different forms of legitimacy and different definitions of service quality. It is these issues that will be explored in the remainder of this report.



## 2 The study

Our study was located in three areas that were disadvantaged in the sense that average income levels, employment rates, educational and health outcomes were below national norms, and that there were concentrations of other social problems. The areas (all names are pseudonyms) were:

- North Millington – a mainly white British residential area in a large, post-industrial and multi-ethnic northern city
- East Moorfield – a predominantly white British semi-rural area in the North of England
- South Cityborough – an ethnically diverse London borough.

We were interested, not only in how school governing bodies in these areas impact on the inner workings of the school, but also in how they relate to local communities and the role they play in encouraging democratic participation at the local level. We focused our work, therefore, not on individual schools, but on areas that were recognised locally as coherent and bounded, and on the groups of schools serving those areas. The advantage of this approach is that we were able to identify areas with very different characteristics. The disadvantage is that we had to work with whichever schools served those areas – and in the event these turned out to be almost all community schools.

Within each area, we started by interviewing the chairs, selected governors and head teachers of local schools, representatives of the local authority governor support service and local authority officers involved in regeneration or community development. We discussed with them our three research questions – about the interests represented by governors, about their influence, and about the relationship between what governors did and the quality of service provided by the school – and invited them to relate these questions to their own experiences. In the course of these discussions, we learned about issues, problems and events locally that seemed to illuminate our questions in a particularly clear way. We therefore followed up these ‘critical incidents’ in greater detail, using them as a way to identify and talk to a wider range of people – parents, children, community leaders and others who had had a role to play in these incidents.

Altogether, we interviewed on one or more occasions over 100 respondents (including some 73 governors) connected with around 14 schools. Inevitably, the

people who were easiest to reach were the education professionals and the most active governors – particularly chairs of governing bodies. Nonetheless, we made every effort to ensure that our sample was drawn as widely as possible. As our research neared its conclusion, we held feedback events in each area for all these respondents, and tested our emerging findings in a series of interviews with decision makers and senior figures at national level who could help us relate them to national policy concerns. These activities lent strong validation to our analysis of the state of governance in schools serving disadvantaged areas, though there were, of course, very different views as to what changes, if any, needed to be made. Since our study was based exclusively in England, we also sought the advice of researchers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as to the situation with regard to school governance in those administrations. Further details of our methods can be found in the Appendix.

### **The areas and the schools**

The term ‘disadvantaged areas’ and the statistical indicators through which they are often described offer only the most crude characterisation of places that are extremely diverse. Moreover, as many of our respondents were quick to point out, people living in those areas are themselves diverse and by no means all would describe themselves as ‘disadvantaged’. In the event, area context turned out to be an important factor in shaping the role played by governing bodies. We set out below, therefore, a more detailed description of each of the three areas.

#### ***North Millington***

North Millington is a largely residential area close to the centre of a large, post-industrial city in the North of England. Its population is mainly white British working class. There are relatively low levels of literacy and numeracy skills, high proportions of children living in overcrowded households, little experience of higher education and high levels of unemployment. Furthermore, those people in work tend to be in low-paid jobs.

Politically, the area returns Labour councillors to a city council in which, at the time of our study, they were in the majority. Traditional political structures seem to be robust in the area and their influence is felt on governing bodies. However, there is less evidence of other forms of community activism. The local authority is developing an ambitious district-based service model. The intention is that child, family and

community services will be managed at local level, with representative school governors participating in governance structures designed to ensure that services meet local needs. As yet, however, these plans have made little impact on the ground in North Millington.

We worked with the governing bodies of three primary and one secondary school serving significant numbers of children from the area. Like other neighbouring schools, they have higher than average numbers of students entitled to free school meals (FSM) and identified as having special educational needs (SEN). There is a high level of population turnover in the area and this is reflected in transience within schools, leading to unstable cohorts and difficulties in sustaining year-on-year achievements. There are problems in attendance, concerns over condoned absences, and increasing numbers of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Overall, children in the area attain at well below national averages.

### ***East Moorfield***

Moorfield is a geographically extensive and diverse 'new unitary' local authority in the North of England. The western part of the borough is part of a densely populated and formerly industrialised conurbation. East Moorfield is more rural in character. However, many of its small towns and villages grew up around single industries, especially mining. When the area as a whole went into industrial decline in the 1970s and 1980s, East Moorfield suffered particularly in terms of unemployment, not least because of its isolation and poor transport links. Since then, East Moorfield has experienced patchy redevelopment, and there are stark contrasts within the area between pleasant rural hamlets and estates in small former mining towns that fall within some of the most deprived areas nationally.

Inward migration to East Moorfield has been limited and its population is ageing and overwhelmingly white British. Given the diverse, semi-rural nature of the area, our respondents told us, people living there identify strongly with their different localities and are perhaps more willing than in other areas to become actively involved in helping to sustain and develop their communities. Strong local allegiances can create rivalries, however, and people living in different towns and villages may have very different perspectives from one another.

Politically, Moorfield has been traditionally a Labour authority, but, at the time of our study, there was a ruling coalition of Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Independent councillors with an opposition group made up of Labour and Independent members. The election of independent councillors has been an East

Moorfield phenomenon. In addition to representation on the borough council, people in East Moorfield are represented on two town councils and three parish councils. A local strategic partnership is responsible for delivering the borough's community strategy. Like other such partnerships, it brings together representatives of key organisations with a commitment to development (for example, local councillors, people from businesses and public service managers) and co-ordinates the local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. One of the problems it faces in East Moorfield is achieving consensus across the different communities on wider area developments and public service delivery. Another challenge, in the context of an overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous population, is engaging with a diverse and scattered minority ethnic community.

We worked with the governing bodies of six schools in East Moorfield. Of five primary schools, four are community primary schools and one is a Church of England voluntary controlled primary. All of them serve relatively stable populations from traditionally close-knit communities and have been attended by successive generations of some families. There are three secondary schools in the East Moorfield area. The one included in this study lies between the other two, which are located in relatively prosperous towns, are higher performing and, in a context of spare school capacity, tend to attract students from its immediate area. The picture with regard to the standard school indicators is more mixed than in North Millington, but the overall pattern, as there, is one of a school population which is more ethnically homogeneous than is the case nationally, but which is also economically poorer and lower attaining than national norms.

### ***South Cityborough***

Cityborough is a London borough that is among the most disadvantaged local authority areas in England. There is a strong divide between the relatively affluent north of the borough and the highly disadvantaged south, where our study was located. Throughout, however, there are pockets of high deprivation interspersed with wealthy professional and business areas, while the area as a whole has access to the rich financial, business and cultural resources of the city. South Cityborough is a multi-ethnic area with both long-stay minority ethnic groups and more transient new populations, including refugees and asylum seekers. The long-stay families in the area tend to experience the sorts of disenchantment that characterise North Millington and East Moorfield. However, many of the more recently arrived families are ambitious to get on and leave the area, seeing education as a route out of their current circumstances.

Politically, the area is a traditional Labour stronghold, and the juxtaposition of socially aware professional groups with highly disadvantaged populations and ambitious immigrant families creates a dynamic mix. There is some limited evidence of community activism as various ethnic groups organise themselves to promote their own interests. The council struggles with the social problems that are typical of many parts of London, but is also alert to the diversity of its population and the equity issues to which that gives rise.

The governing bodies of two primary and two secondary schools were involved in this study – one of the latter being formally designated as having a wider community role. As is typical in London, many families send their children to schools outside their immediate locality and there is fierce competition between schools, particularly at secondary level. As a result, the relationship between schools and ‘their’ communities is less clear-cut than in North Millington and, in particular, in East Moorfield. South Cityborough schools experience the challenges of low attainments and high levels of disadvantage characteristic of school populations in the other two areas. However, they are much more ethnically diverse institutions and are faced both by the resources and by the challenges that arise from the multi-ethnic and transient nature of their areas.

## **Summary**

Our study was based in three areas that share characteristics of high levels of disadvantage and low levels of educational attainment. Beyond this, the areas are different from each other ethnically, economically, politically and culturally. In each area, we interviewed key governors and stakeholders in those schools that serve significant numbers of the area’s children. We also identified and explored ‘critical incidents’ that illuminated the role of governing bodies. The schools are also diverse and face somewhat different challenges, though the majority are constituted as community schools.

### 3 Governors, interests and representation

In this chapter, we consider the question of whose interests the governing bodies in our schools represent and on whose behalf they see themselves as working.

#### Who are the governors?

We asked governors (through their chairs) to give us some brief background information on themselves, in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence and employment background. Their responses showed the following.

- The majority of governors were female. In only three of the 14 schools was there a reasonably even balance between men and women. It was more common for women to make up 60–90 per cent of the governing body.
- The age profile of governors was broadly similar to the likely age profile of schools' parent bodies, but the match is not perfect. Every school had a sizeable minority of older governors, some of whom reported that their own children were now adult. In three of the schools, for instance, 40 per cent or more of governors were over 50.
- The majority of governors identified themselves as white. This is unsurprisingly true of East Moorfield, which has no governors from minority ethnic groups – but, equally, where there are very few children from such groups in the schools. However, even in the ethnically diverse South Cityborough, where children from minority ethnic groups form the majority of school populations, there was only one school where something approaching half of the governors were from such groups.
- The majority of governors lived close to the school. However, in each area, a significant minority came from elsewhere. Even in primary schools (which are more likely to recruit their students from the immediate locality), it was not uncommon for a quarter to a half of governors to live outside the school's immediate locality.
- Overall, about half of governors had a professional employment background. There were, however, considerable variations, and little relationship between the proportion of professionals on the governing body and the social mix of the

school as indicated by student entitlement to free school meals. For instance, 70 per cent of governors in one of the East Moorfield schools and 60 per cent in two of the North Millington schools were from a non-professional background. On the other hand, in four of the 14 schools, all with above-average free school meal entitlements, two-thirds or more of governors came from professional backgrounds.

In themselves, of course, such figures tell us little about whose interests governors serve or whom they see themselves as representing. However, they do indicate that the membership of governing bodies bears little relationship to the composition of school populations nor, by implication, to the composition of local communities. This was confirmed by evidence that various sorts of skewing of governing body membership were at work. Many governing bodies, for instance, found parent governors particularly difficult to recruit and difficult to involve once recruited. One chair of governors in North Millington explained that:

A lot of parents find it intimidating. I think the very name 'governing body' puts people off, and they have this attitude of 'I'm not good enough, it's not within my expertise'.

He also argued that most parent governors found it difficult to stand up to head teachers, were easily manipulated by them and were therefore not inclined to engage too closely with the work of the governing body. Not surprisingly, therefore, many heads and chairs reported that they had to persuade and cajole parents to serve on governing bodies.

Where parents were active, they tended not to be representative of the majority in these disadvantaged areas. As an East Moorfield governor explained:

The parent representatives, I would say, exclusively come from homes of reasonable affluence, where the parent has actually been in school and has an interest anyway. The area that's not represented is the area we get most of the problems from. That's where we've got disaffected young people who come in at the start of school at a very, very low attainment level.

We can see this atypicality in what one North Millington parent governor told us about herself:

Probably, compared to the rest of the parents who were represented in this school, I suppose I was a bit different. My husband is a teacher; he



is actually a teacher in this school. I am a nurse but also a midwife, so I've been to university. Most of the parents who were represented in the last school I was at [*nearby*] weren't, and a lot of them didn't even follow through in their own education ... I probably had more confidence in doing it than they had, because my community work was based through the local church and also a local youth project that was connected to church. So, I had the confidence because I had involvement.

It was not only parents who were unwilling or unable to become involved in governance. In South Cityborough, we were told, many local people were not fluent in English and were effectively excluded from participation. By contrast, other groups provided disproportionate numbers of governors. Although there was little evidence that governing bodies were heavily politicised, local councillors and others who were politically active were commonly found on governing bodies. So, too, were civic-minded clergy and members of local churches. People with a business or public service background were also likely to be active. Such people were highly valued for their managerial skills, though the extent of their presence on governing bodies differed from area to area. South Cityborough has access to large business and public organisations on its doorstep, and benefits from an active 'One Stop Shop' that directs potential governors to governing bodies with vacancies. However, North Millington, and particularly East Moorfield, have no equivalent resources.

In many cases, governing bodies effectively divided themselves into a small core of highly active governors and a large group of governors who were less fully involved. The tendency was for the core to be even more dominated than the governing body as a whole by governors from these more professional groups. This meant that the work of the governing body proceeded more efficiently, but made it even less representative of various stakeholders than its composition might suggest. As a local authority governor in North Millington observed:

If two or three people were to leave, the governing body's structure would be very different ... [*It is*] a stable governing body, a quite effective governing body, but it relies on probably four people being active over that period of time.

Moreover, the two-speed character of many governing bodies further reduced the ability of some groups to become fully involved, as a South Cityborough head pointed out:

I still think it's true, to an extent, that we have sort of a small cadre of very involved governors and most of the rest are slightly passengers. I think



as professionals ... we have all those issues and we're discussing stuff at quite a high strategic level, and I don't always stop ... and make sure everybody was following it.

## Who do governors represent?

Inevitably, the question of the background of governors leads onto the question of who they do and should represent.

This question elicited diverse views from our respondents. For many, the task of a governor was precisely the opposite of representing this or that particular interest. As a North Millington chair put it:

You just want an honest, straightforward person's opinion on something; you don't want one that is coloured by a finance background, or a trade union background, or whatever.

Some governors, therefore, deliberately eschewed the notion of representation:

Really, in a school, you are not representing the LEA [*local education authority*], you are not representing anybody, you are just making a number up, if you like, from different people and how you got there really is a bit irrelevant in some ways.

(Governor, North Millington)

For others, there was a representative role, but it was in respect of the local 'community' as a whole rather than this or that sectional interest. It was important that a chair in particular should be someone who:

... has affiliation to the area and ... hasn't just been shipped in from somewhere.

(Head, North Millington)

This sense was particularly strong in East Moorfield, where the relative isolation of the area meant that governors were less likely than elsewhere to be drawn from outside. A local authority officer felt that this was a mixed blessing:

... if you look at who is on the governing bodies in East Moorfield they tend to be mostly from the area ... I've heard it said more in East

Moorfield schools [*than others*] that they don't want people from outside, that why would somebody be interested in our school if they don't live here? So they are probably less open when they are doing their co-options and appointments.

In these cases, what seemed to matter was not so much any formally representative role as detailed knowledge of the school and the area, combined with a commitment to do the best for local children and their families:

People that are part of the governors are not a cross-section. You usually find that the children of governors, not in every case, but often, are higher academic achievers in the school, and in a way that's pretty obvious because they are the most engaged with the school. Some have their ear to the ground more than others. It's knowing what's going on and what people are saying, and also knowing the community. The knowledge of the community outside of the school is absolutely priceless.  
(Chair, East Moorfield)

A governor in North Millington, who was also a community nurse, was valued, for instance, because she knew the area and its families. As she explained:

I also know the children, whereas a lot of the governors don't know the children ... It's helped with children that, the fact that the parents know me ... whereas they might be afraid to speak to somebody that they don't know.

On the other hand, we found remarkably few governors who had clear affiliations to community groups in such a way that they could be said to be authentically representative of one or other section of the community. There were exceptions to this. In South Cityborough, for instance, there had been a significant effort on the part of the local authority and individual governing bodies to recruit governors from under-represented minority groups. A few of these governors were not simply members of such groups, but were active in community organisations that represented them. In general terms, however, governors thought to be acting on behalf of sectional interests were viewed with suspicion by their colleagues. This account from a South Cityborough head is typical:

One of the governing body tried to involve the community association but did it very inappropriately ... What he really should have done is actually brought it up and discussed it himself, rather than getting a total stranger to come in ... I told him I'd be very happy to discuss it, speak to the chair

of governors and get him to put it on the agenda as an agenda item, and bring it up that way.

The point here may simply be one of due procedure, but it also illustrates both the suspicion of direct community involvement and the way in which the governing body acts as a filter through which such involvement must pass.

We found a similar response to the role of parent governors. More than once, we were told that some parent governors were prone to approach their role in terms of their own child's interests rather than those of the parent body as a whole:

It's a really hard ... thing to ask someone to do, be representative of a huge group, a very wide-ranging group actually, and not put just the needs of your own child to the front because they may not always be compatible with the needs of the others.

(Head, South Cityborough)

The response from more experienced governors to these situations seemed to be to 'manage out' the dissident voices of these governors:

Unfortunately I've experienced one of the new governors writing a paper to the group which was totally inappropriate ... He hadn't grasped the fact that a parent governor does not generalise from their own child's experience ... There were lots of things that were just plain wrong so I suggest that if anyone does want a paper presented they should have it looked over by at least two other governors before they present it and then if that had happened this guy wouldn't be in the embarrassing position of me having to write to him, pointing out all the things that were wrong with it.

(Chair, South Cityborough)

However, most parent governors had 'grasped the fact' that they are not there to represent sectional interests. Indeed, for some, even the idea of representing parents as a whole was inappropriate:

I don't much see myself as a parent rep in that sort of sense. I think more you bring that perspective as a parent to the governing body, but I have never thought of myself as just being there to represent parents' views, although I think they are very important. You tend to get that a little bit when people realise that you are a parent governor. Maybe more people come to you with issues concerning children, or their children, rather than

perhaps other issues. But no, I have never just seen myself as just doing it for the parents.

(Governor, East Moorfield)

Similarly, there were tensions and ambiguities around the role of local councillors as governors. On the one hand, they might be seen as useful for getting things done at local authority level and for their knowledge of the area. However, they might also be seen as putting their political or council allegiances before the interests of the school and its students. This sense had become particularly acute in East Moorfield where a controversial amalgamation of three secondary schools into one had taken place some time before our study began. The local authority's preferred option was to retain the three existing sites, but the majority of governors of the newly federated school wanted to move to a single site and to pursue academy status. Those governors who were also councillors, we were told, found their allegiances split to the point where they felt they had to resign from the governing body. As one explained:

I actually resigned and came off it so I could fight properly as a councillor, because I realised that I couldn't keep the two apart ... People say you should fight from within but I felt I couldn't do that because I actually felt I had a loyalty to the confederation by being on the governing body, even though I felt a lot of the things they were doing were so very wrong. So to avoid that conflict I resigned ... and then fought my fight politically from a different angle.

We found an interesting parallel to this case in South Cityborough. Here, a proposal to fund the rebuilding of a secondary school through PFI (the Private Finance Initiative) was highly controversial, particularly among governors with left-of-centre political affiliations. This created a clear conflict between what these governors saw as the wider public interest and the more immediate interests of the school. As the chair of governors explained:

I'm opposed to PFI: I think it's totally unnecessary but the fact is Cityborough, like most authorities, has no or hardly any capital monies. And I think it was just trying to convince the governing body that it was a risk – well, they thought it was a risk – worth taking.

The head described events in the following terms:

There was ... political stuff that had to be dealt with ... We purposefully did not keep bringing it back to the full governing body meeting ... It would have been noise which would generate lots of hot air and probably caused division within the governing body ... There was still a political

element who didn't particularly want to go down that track. They were pretty much ousted by the chair ... One governor resigned, and that changed the dynamic overnight, quite significantly, and took away that kind of political agenda which was really quite destructive.

This incident was now seen by the remaining governors as a defining moment that united them around a common purpose.

### The common interest

In one way or another, then, governing bodies try to 'oust' sectional interests in favour of a set of common interests, shared by the school as a whole. In our feedback meetings, we pressed governors to explain how these common interests might be defined. The response was that they are best defined in terms of the interests of the children attending the school. These are close to, but not quite synonymous with, the interests of the head and staff, or of parents, or of the wider communities served by the school. They are some distance away from the interests of the local authority, which, as the dispute in East Moorfield shows, might occasionally be seen as 'the enemy'.

In this context, while any specialist skills and experience a governor might have are useful, the most important qualifications are that s/he has the best interests of the children at heart and that they understand the children, the school and the area. As a governor in East Moorfield put it:

It's all right having people from academic, or, you know, business or whatever, but you do need people that are involved with the children don't you, like the mums, the parents, or people that live locally? ... Someone that doesn't live within the area, I think that's quite – it's being realistic isn't it, for these children, for this community, in this area, rather than at a business level high up there?

The implication is that, while disputes on matters of detail might arise from time to time, the common interests that guide governing bodies are likely to make consensus rather than conflict the norm. As another East Moorfield governor put it:

*[Governors] work together well. Obviously sometimes you get discussions where not everybody has the same views, but you get that in all walks of life. Generally we all seem to work together and want the best for the school and the children, basically.*

Of course, governors' commitment to the common interests of the school may sometimes bring them into conflict with the views of particular sections of the parent body or local communities. We found at least two examples of this. In one, an East Moorfield chair of governors told us how he had had to 'take on' parents from one village when the decision was made to amalgamate their school with another small school to create a more viable unit – the school whose governing body he chaired – in a neighbouring village. In another, there had been a good deal of controversy when the head and governors of a girls' secondary school in North Millington proposed that the school nurse should be allowed to provide family planning advice in an area where teenage pregnancy rates were high. They organised a consultation process with parents, which elicited only a very limited response. They then convened an open meeting where fierce opposition to the proposal was expressed. However, this meeting, we were told, was not representative. Those present:

... weren't all our parents, there were aunties, grannies, you know, Muslim parents and relations, and only one person spoke, just sort of packing the room.

(Head teacher)

Despite this public show of opposition, and the opposition of a parent governor, the majority of the governors decided to press ahead. Their reasoning was explained by a community governor in classic 'common-interest' terms:

It's all well and good saying, 'There's a half dozen kids here, we don't want them to be influenced by all of this', but hang on, we've still got 1,850 here that will be influenced by it. So unfortunately, to use the expression, it's a democratic world. We look at the overall majority and the potential benefits that can come out by putting that into place, if you like.

The sense of shared purpose and common interest might be explicable in East Moorfield in terms of the small and cohesive nature of local communities. However, as we see from the case just cited, even in the two urban areas, the same sense of rallying around the school was dominant. For at least one chair of governors in South Cityborough, this was something that was specific to schools serving disadvantaged areas:

I think we're either more cohesive or slightly less demanding of the teaching staff than you would get in a more middle-class area ... We don't have philosophical disputes, so I think that is different, and that comes from, I think, partly to do with the nature of the people on the governing body but also to do with the community it's serving, which if we weren't together it would be a disaster, there's too much stress on the system.

It is difficult from a study located in disadvantaged areas to be sure whether this is actually an attitude that is common to governors everywhere. Nonetheless, it serves to underline the impression, in these schools at least, of governors as non-representative but locally connected people, operating on the basis of goodwill and consensus rather than of politics and conflict.

## **Summary**

Although the membership of governing bodies in the areas where this study was located was diverse, it was also skewed towards women, older people, and people from majority ethnic and professional backgrounds. This skewing was even more evident among the limited numbers of governors who were most active. By and large, the representation of sectional interests was viewed with distrust by governors and attempts were made to manage out such representation. Instead, governors saw themselves as working on behalf of the interests of the school as a whole, defined particularly as the interests of the children in the school.

## 4 The role of governors

Our discussion of who governors are and who they represent leads us to the question of what governors do and why they do it. How, in other words, is the role of governors in schools serving disadvantaged areas understood, constrained and facilitated?

### Critical friendship

... whatever it's – what's it called – critical friend or something? It's the classic – I don't know what that means, I never have!  
(Chair of governors, South Cityborough)

One of the central concerns raised by the Government's guidance to governors (DfES, 2004) is that governing bodies may feel more comfortable supporting head teachers than challenging them. We certainly found evidence of this. The emphasis on consensus, noted in the last chapter, for instance, makes challenge less likely. One chair in North Millington described governors' meetings in a way that recognised this tendency:

... we do try and make them entertained and relaxed and laugh in the meetings. This is the dilemma you've got ... If you start making them challenging and hostile and start putting too much of a burden on people and expect them to run the school with very little time or training, no one will want to do it [*but*] our big failing is this area of evaluation, self-evaluation as well ... and challenge.

However, as a head in the same area explained, the lack of challenge comes from both sides:

Governing bodies, in my opinion anyway, are not, they're not stropky individuals, they are people who want a consensus, and they want co-operation and they want support, and I wouldn't do anything to prevent that or alienate my governors individually or collectively.

This is not to imply that relationships between governors and their heads were inevitably cosy. Some, like the East Moorfield governor speaking here, were indeed prepared to challenge head teachers:



I think we're not a governing body who just sit and nod and say yes, yes, whatever the head says. We actually discuss things at length and we do it in detail, and if there's something we're not quite happy with then we will say that we're not happy with it. The budgets, when we do the budgets, we go through them with a fine toothcomb. If there's something we're not happy with in there then we'll speak up. We aren't a governing body that don't ask questions, but we do respect what [*the head teacher*] does and, you know, we give her our full support, but we do still ask questions, and we do put our points of view.

In such cases, heads tended to find the critical challenge of their governors valuable for improving their own performance. As an East Moorfield head put it:

They are a critical eye because they can be very helpful in me sounding out ideas. One of their roles is to make sure that I don't run away with myself and just don't have ideas that would be detrimental to the school, not that I would deliberately do that, but if I have an idea through the governing body, I can sound them out.

However, there appeared to be strict, if implicit, rules about how and when such challenges could be made. One North Millington head, for instance, objected to over-zealous scrutiny by the governors, which:

... suggests that it is an authoritarian kind of relationship, and it's not. It is a fine dividing line ... We have got to get individuals to realise that they are not here to monitor the school with a magnifying glass. Well, they are but it's the motives and intentions behind why.

In return, we were told by governors of attempts by some heads to manipulate them, withhold information and prevent them inquiring too closely into the head's actions. A parent governor in North Millington reported her unfortunate experiences with a head of this kind:

We all felt, as governors, that we were just rubber stamping what she wanted, and what she wanted, she got and she did. It didn't matter whether you weren't happy with it, she'd have her way.

One of the implicit rules, therefore, seems to be that challenge has to be based on mutual respect, on an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of each other's roles, and on a preservation of the boundary between the respective roles of governors and heads.

Underlying this – particularly among governors themselves – was a sense that their work for the common interests of the school and its children has a moral force. As an East Moorfield governor explained:

I think broadly [*governors*] do share the same sort of aspirations for the children. It isn't just about As to Cs [*i.e. the performance in national assessments for which governing bodies are formally accountable*] ... It is about other things. It is about a more rounded education. It's about spiritual development. It's about the opportunities not just during school but out of school, before school, after school.

This governor felt that such a position was necessary in schools serving disadvantaged areas for the simple reason that they could never generate high levels of attainment and so had to have a wider educational purpose. Similarly, a South Cityborough head described how his governors would bring this moral purpose to bear in their decision making. It was, he reported, common for them to ask:

'Is it in the interest of the students?' I think they are all quite student-centred in that sense, really, and quite value-driven.

The implication is that heads were likely to win the approval of governors where they shared this moral purpose. Explaining why one candidate was appointed to the headship rather than her fellow interviewees, for instance, a North Millington chair of governors observed:

... the thing that came over with her was a very clear sense of purpose and a very clear ethos. Very clear standards if you like; morals are very clear, small 'm', and I think you'll see that in the way the school operates.

The corollary of this, however, was that the boundaries of respectful challenge from governors and head could be breached legitimately if the head failed to act in accordance with this wider moral purpose. We saw this dramatically in a North Millington primary school where, the chair told us, the tradition on the governing body had been to accept passively whatever the head wanted. This changed when the head tried to spend funds on a security fence to protect the school buildings, rather than on upgrading the nursery to benefit local children:

I said, 'You can't spend X amount of money without getting the permission of at least the Finance Committee'. So he [*the head*] didn't like that at all, and then when he went to the governors and said 'This is what we're going to do', we said 'No' because we've been wanting work done in the

nursery for ages and ages, and he had put the nursery last on the list. We said, 'No, because the nursery is constantly being pushed out and we want it at the top of the list'. He didn't like that at all, and made some sarky comment about, 'I think you need to check what your roles and responsibilities are' and I said 'I know what they are, here's a handout'. So, he didn't like that because he had this money in mind and this is how he wanted to spend it.

## **The public role**

The critical friendship role is largely an inward-facing one. However, most of the governors we worked with saw themselves as also having an outward-facing role that is concerned with the relationships between the school and the various stakeholder groups with which it interfaces.

Sometimes, this role was concerned with mobilising resources to support the school. We have already seen, for instance, how governors with political affiliations could use their contacts to promote the schools' interests. Similarly, governors with business or financial connections might be able to lever additional resources into the school. This was particularly the case in South Cityborough where such connections were more common – much to the delight of one head teacher:

One governor gets us links with celebrities that live near him, so when we asked them to be a patron we got a cheque instead. Hey ho, who's complaining!

Sometimes, this role was seen as being about mobilising local networks in support of the school. Even governors without resource-rich connections were likely to have a range of contacts among local people:

I think also the governing body are actually very, very important in helping the school to promote its vision and its values ... The vast majority live out in the community. They are allies and they are a great communication link with the day-to-day people that they meet in the corner shop, in the pub or in the lounge having a cup of coffee or talking over the fence. So I would expect from my governing body, you know, that loyalty and that willingness to promote the school in the widest sense.

(Head teacher, East Moorfield)

Sometimes, however, the public role of governors was not about mobilising support so much as about fighting off external threats. This tends particularly to be the case where local authority policy seems to be riding roughshod over the interests of the school. We have already seen, for instance, the conflicts that arose in East Moorfield over the local authority's plans for amalgamating schools. There was a similar incident in South Cityborough where the governors from a number of schools banded together to protest against – and eventually change – the school meals contract negotiated on their behalf by the local authority. In North Millington, it was the special educational needs (SEN) provision made by the authority that was a mobilising issue:

The one thing that causes this governing body to get annoyed and upset is [*the LEA's*] ... very poor record, in our opinion, of supporting children with SEN ... This very room we're sitting in was set up as a nurture room and was funded with a specialist teacher to actually take children with particular behavioural problems out of class and give them a little oasis ... and it really worked tremendously well ... And then the LEA announced that they were ending the funding of it, and really that was it! We got very unhappy at that point because it was a culmination of a lot of concern about SEN ... We managed to arrange a meeting with a couple of the service managers from the LEA and managed to enlist the help of two out of three local councillors and basically told them that we were extremely unhappy about this situation.

(Chair)

Running throughout these different manifestations of the public role, however, was the same sense that the school has a set of interests that are broadly understood and agreed, and that it is the job of the governors to promote and protect those interests.

### **The strategic role**

Under certain circumstances, the role of critical friendship to the head became one of strategic leadership. This seemed most likely to happen when, for some reason, the governors were more experienced, or in a more powerful position, than the head teacher. This was most obviously the case when the time came to appoint a new head teacher. Many governors recognised this as a key task. As a South Cityborough chair put it:

In the end, it's the staff ... of the school who create the resource. All we can do is make sure, by the very key decision we did two years ago, that you get the right head teacher.

At such points, there was often some sense of a difference between the 'common interest' of the school and the interests of heads and aspiring heads. The role of governors, therefore, was to act as guardians of the common interest and appoint the candidate who seemed likely to serve it best. Another South Cityborough chair, for instance, insisted for this reason that students be involved in the appointment procedure:

I said the Student Council should be involved with appointing a head teacher: it's their school ... Afterwards, the applicants said it was the worst interview they'd had in their lives. It was lovely! It was their school, we said.

Other circumstances that put governors in a similarly strong position might arise. The process of amalgamating secondary schools in East Moorfield, for instance, brought together a group of experienced governors with a head teacher who was in an acting rather than a permanent position. The shift in traditional power relations was confirmed by the fact that the amalgamation gave rise to issues that went well beyond the day-to-day running of the school:

I think we were much more involved in the development and the way the school was going, how we saw it revolve around a development plan, and I think those ideas, they didn't just come from the senior managers, they came from the governors as well. It was what our vision was – what did we want to achieve in Moorfield? We were lucky in a sense that this governing body was made up of probably a lot of people from the other three governing bodies that were perhaps more experienced as governors, so you were already there. It wasn't like you had a lot of people who didn't have experience and were just finding their feet, and we all knew what we were all about.  
(Chair of governors)

One head teacher created an executive group of governors precisely to try to enhance their engagement with strategic issues:

The chairs of the subcommittees and myself ... tried to meet to look at how we could try and get involved in more strategic planning of the school. And some of that strategic planning was a kind of political agenda

that we had to manage, rather than school improvement plan, if that makes any sense ... a more high-level, strategic development agenda, which tried to take into account the LEA, government policy – government political agenda – as well ... It was a fairly informal group ... We didn't take minutes ... It wasn't felt appropriate that that group report back its meetings to the rest of the governing body.

(Head, South Cityborough)

However, the fact that this group was driven by the head teacher and did not report back to the governing body as a whole is significant. By and large, the strategic role of governors came to the fore only in particular circumstances. It was, in this sense, a phase in the ongoing process of governance rather than an ongoing part of the governing body's role.

### Defining quality

The absence of a strong and stable strategic role for governors bears on one of the key focuses of our study. We wished to understand how governors define and enhance the quality of service provided by their schools. We anticipated that some of them at least would be able to articulate a set of principles that might offer strategic direction to their work and that might effectively define the 'service quality' at which they were aiming. We also thought that they might expound these principles in reaction to the Government's standards agenda, defining an alternative educational vision more suited to the disadvantaged populations they served.

To some extent, our expectations were fulfilled. When pressed, some governors would give us their vision in the rather broad terms used by this North Millington chair:

I think people are educated to be educated, not to be work fodder ... I would have thought most teachers would think that a child is educated to be a good citizen, not to be something that's employable.

However, few governors spoke in such terms, and it was difficult to persuade even this few to elaborate further. There was, in our work with governors, little sense that they were pursuing a fully thought-out strategy aimed at realising some clear vision of what schooling should be like for local children.

This is not to say, however, that governors did not act in a principled way. On the contrary, they held values in high esteem and were, as we have seen, prepared to battle for their principles against both external and internal threats. It is simply that their principles were articulated in terms of the ‘interests of the school’ or the ‘interests of the children’, which, for the most part, were taken to be self-evident. It is possible to deduce from some of the examples and statements we have given above what ‘service quality’ meant for these governors. It is clearly not reducible to performance standards of the sort favoured by government – though no one we spoke to rejected such standards out of hand. It includes doing the best for vulnerable children – those with special educational needs, for instance, or very young children. It embraces, as in the case above, the broader purposes of education for personal development and citizenship. Governors themselves, however, showed little inclination to develop such principles into explicit performance standards or detailed prescriptions.

## **Summary**

Although government guidance expects governors to act as critical friends to head teachers and as strategic leaders of their schools, the reality is more complex than this. By and large, the governors in our study felt happier offering support rather than challenge and tended to rely on heads for strategic leadership. They also found it difficult to articulate any clear and detailed vision of ‘service quality’ on which to base their leadership. However, they did have a strong and principled sense of acting in the interests of the school and of the children within it. They were, therefore, prepared to battle external threats to these interests and their support for head teachers was conditional on the head too acting in what they saw as this common interest.



## 5 Possibilities and constraints

So far, we have described the ways in which governors set about their work as though they were free to interpret their role as they see fit. In practice, however, they are surrounded by constraints that shape what they do in important ways. Many of these constraints impact on the work of governing bodies everywhere. However, some of them at least have a particular impact on schools serving disadvantaged areas.

### Governor capacity

One such specific constraint is the capacity of individual governors and governing bodies as a whole to undertake the tasks expected of them. The response of a new parent governor in South Cityborough captures the sense some governors have of being overwhelmed by these demands:

I went ‘Oh my god what have I let myself in for?’ because the amount of paperwork is unbelievable ... Generally we get the paperwork beforehand and it’s that, that kind of plays on my mind a bit I suppose, because I didn’t understand a lot of it, which I kind of felt shame on me as well, as I’ve been a parent of children going to school for many years. But I really didn’t understand it at all, even as a governor, and I’m still finding it, two years later, still going – panic attacks and things.

This sense comes from a number of sources. Most obviously, there are the sheer number of tasks governors have to undertake:

I’m Chair of Personnel and we meet at least once a term, sometimes twice. The main governing body meets once or twice a term. I thought that was it, until I started thinking, ‘What do I come here for?’ There are things like, the chairman will ring me up and say that the head wants to exclude a couple of kids, so you have to prepare for that, and arrange to come. Then we have this review of exclusions now as well, where you have to review the cases. Then there is the annual meeting on the *[head’s]* performance, which, on the face of it, if you read the minutes, takes about half an hour. The reality is that it takes a whole afternoon or a morning, plus the time that I take with the adviser who is going to do it ... *[T]*here is an awful lot to read. You have got to go through last year’s performance



reviews and targets and goodness knows what. Then you get invited to, say, making a complaint through the head, something to do with health and safety and the head wants a governor to be involved. So you get a phone call, 'Can you come up?' So you go up and you end up spending an hour or so trying to deal with that. Then things seem to grow, and so on and so forth.

(Governor, East Moorfield)

The time required to meet these demands explains to some extent why governing bodies tended to divide into a core who undertake the majority of the work and a periphery who are less fully involved. As some governors explained to us, it was difficult for them to be fully involved if they had childcare responsibilities or were in full-time work. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that some of the most active governors were retired or were in a form of employment flexible enough to take into account their commitment to governance.

However, this is not simply a matter of time. Even governors with a good grasp of educational issues found the complexities of governance difficult to come to terms with. A North Millington governor, who was also principal of a further education college, explained the problem in this way:

It's the thing that I find still very difficult when I walk into a school ... I've got management skills in education, yeah – but I don't have the knowledge of circumstance nor the professional engagement with the staff to be able to get anywhere near it in their context. I think politicians have misled governors there. Where governance is bad they're doing things they shouldn't be doing, I really do believe that. I think, yeah, accountability of professions, absolutely, but there is a professional thing in managing teaching.

Not surprisingly, governing bodies were keen to recruit expert governors who are able to handle the managerial aspects of the role. However, this brought a cost in terms of their ability to represent local people:

You need governors who can contribute, so it's a toss-up isn't it, between either governors who are representative of the community of the school population, but also you need governors who can actually pull their weight and get the work done, because there's an awful lot of work, and you need to be able to make sure every governor is taking part in one of the major committees and is doing their share of tasks. Otherwise it becomes very onerous for a few, and I would say that's been the situation. Lots of

the one-stop ones [*i.e. recruited via the Governors' One Stop Shop*] are lawyers, and fine he's great when he's there, but he's not there an awful lot, and they're not going to be there an awful lot if they're doing a full-time job.

(Chair of governors, South Cityborough)

This problem is multiplied for the majority of governors who have no such expertise. As we have seen, such governors were often valued – and value themselves – for their links with local communities and their commitment to the best interests of the school. However, many of them felt that they were being dragged into a role for which they had neither the expertise nor the time:

I was chair because nobody else seemed to want to do it ... I was told, 'Oh, it'll just be a phone call once a week', but you could actually have a full-time job doing it. I work full time and I have two children ... I feel I don't have enough time to do it properly ... You should have some skills that you bring to the governing body, whereas I think, without any disrespect to my governing colleagues, we don't have particular skills or we didn't appreciate what was involved. I certainly didn't anyway.

(Chair, North Millington)

In these circumstances, governors felt themselves caught between the sort of contribution many of them would like to make to the school and the sorts of work they were required to undertake:

I think one of the issues probably is that the statutory framework of what governors have to do has become more onerous, so it's probably more difficult for governing bodies to take that sort of general, critical friend view of what's actually happening in the school, and one of the things our governors will quite regularly say is they feel they don't really know about the day-to-day life of the school.

(Governor, South Cityborough)

As another chair in the same area put it:

... my feeling is we've been made into civil servants.

A common account was that, in these circumstances, governors are likely to withdraw to the periphery and leave decision making to the head and the core governors. A parent governor in East Moorfield, when asked who speaks most in meetings, replied succinctly, 'Not me'. She explained:

I would say *[discussions]* revolve around the chair, the vice chair and the head teacher. I mean, obviously anyone else who is there can say what they want to say but, well, *[the chair's]* been doing it a long time now, and *[the vice chair]* has as well, so they sort of know what they're doing more. But it's like you get to a point where you think, I can't ask what that means because I've asked that many times, 'What's that?'

A number of heads reported that, rather than the governing body challenging them, they were having to try, as one put it, to 'spoon-feed' their governors in an effort to increase their understanding and involvement. In some cases, this meant that the idea of governors challenging heads was a myth:

They'll see the PANDA *[a document setting out details of the school's annual performance]*, and they'll see a bit more than that actually ... But I don't think that's held, and I don't think they mull it over in the way they need to, and I don't think they actually, totally understand the emphasis of it in terms of what the role of a governing body is, and I don't know how to get that information across.

(Head teacher, South Cityborough)

This inevitably creates a position in which governors know only what heads tell them. As the South Cityborough chair quoted above commented:

It is a very steep learning curve when you come in from outside. I reckon it took me a year before I understood really what was going on, mainly because everybody else is in the know and you're not, and you will always have that barrier between the professionals and the amateurs. The professionals will always be five steps ahead of you. It's inevitable.

As we saw in previous chapters, some governors felt that head teachers exploit this control of information to keep governors at arm's length. Local authorities might be aware of this but there were sensitivities around seeming to undermine the head's position:

I don't believe *[governors]* have access to the information they need directly without relying on the head teacher, and as an authority there is lots of information that we have that we don't share with governors. *[We're]* trying to break that culture of people thinking, 'Well we might upset head teachers if we share this information with governors'.

(Governor support service officer, East Moorfield)

However, it was not necessary for heads to be manipulative in order for governor involvement to be limited. Governors were quite capable of putting limits on themselves:

How do I say to a teacher with 20 years' experience, 'You need to push up your numeracy by 2 or 3 per cent? What are you going to do about that?' That teacher could think, 'What are you going to do about it then? You tell me. I am here working my socks off and you come in here and tell me that?'

(Chair, North Millington)

Partly what happened in cases such as this was that governors with non-educational backgrounds were reluctant to challenge teachers on what they saw as their home turf. As an East Moorfield chair explained:

The most difficult thing to have a dialogue in, of course ... is teaching standards. A whole governing body never discusses teachers' performance. These things are discussed behind closed doors.

Partly, however, it was simply the sense of the 'common interest' and the desire to proceed through consensus rather than conflict. This was very apparent in an East Moorfield primary school where the governors had recently had to refuse a pay award to a long-serving teacher. They were clear that their decision was a proper one, but they were very unhappy at having been dragged into this contentious arena. They saw the school, they told us, as a 'family', and these sorts of hard managerial decisions destroyed this family atmosphere.

## The policy context

This sense of being forced to operate in areas that were not properly theirs was common among governors. The blame, they felt, should be allocated firmly at the Government's door. The issue was not simply that the Government places increasing demands on governors, but that both national and local government direct school policy, limit governing bodies' room for manoeuvre and require governors to focus on issues that they feel are less important or where they feel less able to make a contribution:

Sometimes too much is put down on the fact that we've got to ensure that the staff are hitting all these targets ... What the Government says, it just

seems sometimes that there is too much of it going on when we could have been ... spending more time, as I say, looking at the provision of food within the schools, which I didn't realise until about a year ago was such a problem ... I mean some of the stuff that comes through! ... We've basically got to take the LEA's advice and just accept what they say to us, especially if that's come from the head master – 'This is the best way' ... We have a limited time to discuss the matters there you know, and we just have to accept what's put in front of us.

(Governor, East Moorfield)

Such acceptance was not necessarily unquestioning, but the capacity of governors to challenge external imperatives was limited. The various conflicts we identified suggest that, in general terms, governors were able to make a difference where the battles they were engaged in did not confront national or local policy head-on. So, the North Millington governors were able to move forward with their family planning service, because the conflict was essentially an internal one, and in any case the initiative fitted well with the direction of government policy. In East Moorfield, however, the combined power of the governing bodies was not able to overcome the council's opposition to building a new single-site school until there was a change in administration, just as, in South Cityborough, governors felt they had no option other than to accept a PFI scheme in line with local and national policy. The school meals issue in South Cityborough was more complex. On an issue that was in line with (hastily formulated) government policy and that was not concerned with the schools' core business of raising achievement, some were able to break free of the contract negotiated by the local authority. However, others felt they could not take on the added responsibility of managing their own contracts. As one chair reported:

We stalled really ... because we just don't have the capacity within the governing body to do that kind of business planning. The schools that have opted out have either got their own bursars ... or they have governors who are accountants.

The situation was perhaps best summed up by the experience of East Moorfield governors in setting up their newly amalgamated secondary school. With a strong sense of the needs of local children in an area of disadvantage, they wanted to develop a distinctive form of provision. However, they rapidly discovered the limits of their power:

... we all knew what we were all about, so we could be a bit more daring and could take bigger risks. We knew we had to do something radical if we were ever going to change what's happening here in this area. We

have got to be much more radical than we ever have been in the past, you know. But it's hard getting support for being radical because, I mean, when we wanted to change the timetable and the hours of the day to fit in with what we were doing, the LEA were very controlling, even to the point of sending letters back that the then Principal was sending out to parents and suggesting alterations.

(Governor, East Moorfield)

A further limiting factor on governing bodies was their lack of connection into wider decision-making bodies that might increase their power. We have already noted how few links we were able to find between governors and activist community organisations, and how political affiliations were viewed with some suspicion. Likewise, governors were either not represented on local decision-making bodies, or saw little connection between their school governance activities and this other role. This is particularly surprising, given that we were working in disadvantaged areas where community involvement in decision making was an explicit aim of national and local policy. As a local strategic partnership manager in East Moorfield explained:

Certainly, from where I come from, in terms of the work of the local strategic partnership and the way that it engages with community and voluntary sector organisations and that sort of element of things, there is very little direct contact with schools themselves. It's by default. There are certainly school governors involved with the partnership, but not with the school governor hat on. They just happen to be school governors who are there in a different guise.

It was also the case that local authority governor support services tended to operate in isolation from other parts of the local authority concerned with regeneration and community development. If they had close links anywhere, it was with other parts of the local authority's education (or, latterly, children's services) department.

We noted earlier that governors were often seen as ambassadors for the school in local communities. However, we found little evidence that they were also able to act as community leaders. A head in North Millington explained that their focus tended to be very much on internal school matters:

I don't think our governors have got the capacity to have an impact on the community at the moment ... Governance tends to be what goes on in the school, not within the community.

This head believed that he might in future be able to strengthen the community role of the governing body. It was ironic, however, that it was the head leading the governors into the community, rather than the governors bringing the power of the community to bear on the school.

## **Promising developments**

Although much of what we were told about governing bodies pointed to the constraints under which they operated, it was also clear that some of those constraints could be overcome by purposeful action.

For instance, national and local government initiatives, combined with a proactive approach from governing bodies, were able to overcome at least some of the problems of recruitment. We have already mentioned the Governors' One Stop Shop, which seemed to be having some effect in South Cityborough in matching potential governors with time and expertise to governing bodies with vacancies. In the same authority, the Governor Support Service was proactive in canvassing for governors among the many minority and under-represented groups in the area. Similarly, we were told that there was a marked difference between governing bodies that actively sought new recruits with appropriate skills or backgrounds and those that simply bemoaned the fact that recruitment was difficult.

It was also evident that some governing bodies were better than others at inducting and supporting new governors. Some, for instance, had mentoring schemes whereby more experienced governors supported less experienced ones. Some encouraged governors to develop their understanding of the school by spending time working with children and, in one school, governors were allocated a class with which to develop a relationship. Elsewhere, governing bodies encouraged participation in the way they managed their business. For instance, the chair and head might encourage governors who were pressed for time to focus only on issues where they had most to contribute. Some governing bodies were trying to break out of formal and (for some governors) daunting committee procedures. One South Cityborough governing body, for instance, alternated business meetings with 'issues meetings' that took the form of open discussions to which more governors were able to contribute.

These were simple strategies that could, in principle, work anywhere. They stemmed from the realisation that it was crucial to support new governors and to bridge the gap between professionals and experienced governors who 'knew the ropes' and newcomers who were likely to feel out of their depth. However, simple as these



strategies were, it was clear that they depended on the initiative of particular governor support services and, even more, on the thoughtfulness and commitment of particular heads and chairs of governors. It was also clear that they were ameliorative in nature. They did something towards building the capacity of governing bodies in areas where capacity was a problem. However, they did not address the root causes of lack of capacity, nor, of course, did they change the basic structures of the governing body's role, with all its inherent demands and limitations.

### **Summary**

Governors were not entirely free to define their roles as they wished. They were significantly constrained by their own lack of capacity for the complex tasks they are required to undertake and by the policy frameworks within which they are required to operate. National policy initiatives and the work of proactive chairs, heads and local authorities could go some way towards ameliorating these problems, but, since the constraints were structural, they could not entirely overcome them.



## 6 Some options for change

### The state of governance

If you took my secretary away or the school [*caretaker*] ... or any one of my class teachers away, it would have a huge impact ... Governing bodies ... can be highly effective, full of very good people [*but*], if it didn't exist, you might not notice.

(Head teacher, South Cityborough)

The picture that emerges from our study suggests that the state of governance in schools serving disadvantaged areas is decidedly mixed. Most of the governors, head teachers and local authority officers we spoke to felt that governors are working hard and that, under the right circumstances, they can make a valuable contribution to the running of schools. Those circumstances include, above all, an adequate supply of governors with time, commitment and expertise to engage with the burdensome and complex business of governance. Provided there is at least a core group of governors able to do this, they can act as critical friends to the head teacher, bring local knowledge to bear on decision making, and act as the ambassadors for the school with local people and local decision makers.

However, those circumstances are difficult to create. Recruiting governors is a problem, and recruiting governors with time, commitment and expertise is particularly difficult. In reality, the head and chair might have to invest a good deal of energy in trying to equip governors with the knowledge and confidence to offer constructive challenge. Without this, governors might remain at the periphery of decision making or simply rubber-stamp the head's proposals. Moreover, even where governors are informed and active, their real room for manoeuvre is strictly limited, and they often feel themselves overburdened with managerial tasks for which they are not suited or which they do not see as appropriate.

Although these difficulties might occur anywhere, our study shows that they have a distinctive flavour in areas of disadvantage. If the local population has relatively low levels of skill and limited experience of civic participation, recruitment and retention are particular problems. The governors who are recruited, therefore, may be less likely to reflect the local population than is the case elsewhere. Indeed, they may have to be 'imported' from other areas, while marginalised groups in local communities play little part in school governance. The capacity of governing bodies to reflect local needs and wishes may, therefore, be compromised. In any case, even

if governors identify local needs calling for a local response, they must work within national policy frameworks that pay little attention to the distinctive circumstances in their disadvantaged areas.

## What are governors for?

Running as an undercurrent beneath these practical challenges of governance are more fundamental questions about the role of governors and the nature of governance. In particular, what response can be made to the argument of the head quoted at the start of this chapter that governing bodies might not be missed if they were simply to disappear. In Chapter 1, we suggested that three sorts of rationale – managerial, localising, and democratising – might be offered for the continued existence of governing bodies. In Table 1, we set out what we believe to be the implications of our study for each of these rationales.

It is clear that the problems with governor recruitment, retention and capacity that have been set out above seriously compromise the ability of governing bodies

**Table 1 The rationales for governance**

Rationale	Features	Realities in disadvantaged areas
Managerial	Governing bodies increase the managerial efficiency and effectiveness of the school by scrutinising, challenging and supporting its professional staff.	Governors with the necessary time, commitment and expertise are difficult to find. Governors feel ill-equipped to challenge. Governors and heads are wary of conflict. Many governors find the role alien.
Localising	Governing bodies bring local knowledge to bear on external imperatives and implement them in the light of 'what works here'.	Governors feel relatively comfortable with this role. Governors are guided by notions of a 'common interest'. Governors operate under constraints that limit the scope for localisation. The legitimacy of governors as arbiters of the common interest is doubtful.
Democratising	Governors, as the representatives of local people, exercise a significant degree of control over the nature of the service on offer to them.	Governors are not representative of local people. Governing bodies are not well connected with other local decision-making processes. Governors shy away from conflict between sectional interests. Governors have limited freedom of action.

in disadvantaged areas to fulfil the *managerial* rationale. Although government guidance, as we have seen, appears to favour this rationale, it is based on assumptions about who governors are which simply do not hold good in these areas. Put another way, the more governing bodies are filled with the sorts of confident, public-spirited, well-informed people with time on their hands required by this rationale, the less likely they are to reflect the characteristics of the local populations on whose behalf they might be supposed to be acting.

Moreover, the majority of governors themselves seem more comfortable with and competent in what we called the *localising* rationale. They are happy to see themselves as bringing local knowledge to bear on decision making in the school. In particular, they see themselves as acting in some notion of the common interest of the school as a whole – and, particularly, its children – which their detailed knowledge of the school enables them to perceive. Their lack of managerial expertise and their reluctance to engage in conflict with the head is less of a problem when they can form a partnership with the head around this notion of common interest and when they can reserve their capacity for conflict for those outside the school who threaten this common interest. That said, however, the ability of governors to win such battles and develop a true local agenda is, as we have seen, strictly limited. Moreover, governors are largely unelected and somewhat unrepresentative of local people. In this context, it is not clear whether the local experience of some governors, and the undoubted commitment of many, entitle them to arbitrate on what lies in the best interests of the school and its children – let alone of local families and communities. At the very least, there may be other interpretations of the ‘common interest’ that remain unheard in their deliberations.

This has implications, of course, for the *democratising* rationale. Governing bodies constitute an important form of civic participation on the part of their members. However, given their lack of formal and actual representativeness, it is difficult to see how they do so for local communities as a whole, nor how they enable such communities to exercise effective control over the service provided by schools. This problem is exacerbated by the distrust of sectional interests on the part of governing bodies, their avoidance of internal conflict, and the disconnection between school governance and other forms of community governance or activism. Moreover, even if governors were more representative of local people, they have no real freedom to place local needs and wishes before the imperatives of national policy.

While it is important not to lose sight of the many positive aspects of governors’ current roles, this picture is, in fact, doubly depressing. Not only is each of the rationales for the existence of governing bodies flawed in practice, but those rationales effectively undermine one another. The better equipped governing bodies

in disadvantaged areas are to fulfil the managerial rationale, the less appropriately constituted they are likely to be in terms of the localising and democratising rationales. By the same token, the more authentically governors represent diverse local interests, the less likely they are to generate the sorts of consensus needed either for the smooth managerial oversight of the school or the pursuit of a shared view of the common school interest. The more governors pursue this common interest, the less sympathy they are likely to have for external targets and imperatives.

This is nowhere more evident than when we consider the question of ‘service quality’, which began as central to our inquiry. The definition of quality turns out to be inseparable from the question of who controls that definition. While the Government’s standards agenda defines quality in terms of a series of performance measures, this makes sense only if governors are cast in a managerial role. If the rationale for governance is a localising one, then quality has to be defined in terms of some implicit notion of the common interest. If the rationale is democratising, then quality is presumably defined in terms of the responsiveness of the school as a public institution to the communities it serves. These definitions may well coincide at various points – as we noted previously, we found few governors who openly reject government notions of standards. However, their origins and the sources of their legitimacy are quite different. Ultimately, the definition of service quality depends on how the purposes of schooling are understood and, as part of this, how the relationship between public institutions and citizens is conceived.

## Options for change

This leads to the question of what, if anything, should be done about this state of affairs. Should governing bodies simply be allowed to disappear? Should they be reformed in some way? Or should well enough be left alone? We discussed these questions both with participants in our fieldwork and with respondents to our policy and ‘home countries’ interviews. In the following sections, therefore, we set out a series of options that arise from their responses and our own reflection on our findings.

### *Incremental improvement*

One set of options starts from the assumption that governing bodies as currently constituted make important contributions to schools and that they are in need

of improvement rather than any more radical change. Where people suggested such improvements, they tended to be concerned with questions of governing body capacity, particularly in respect of their managerial tasks. By and large, our respondents seemed to feel that this was currently the area of greatest weakness and that the localising role was already being played reasonably well. The role of governors in relation to democratisation was rarely mentioned.

We noted in the previous chapter some of the approaches and initiatives that seem reasonably simple to implement, yet are likely to have important ameliorative effects in respect of the problems facing governing bodies. Other changes of this kind were suggested to us. For instance, some governors were keen on having the chance to meet their counterparts from other schools. Currently, such opportunities seem to be largely monopolised by the active 'core'. Others favoured a right to be released from their workplaces – though they stopped short of asking to be paid, on the grounds that this might compromise their commitment to the 'common interest'.

Another set of strategies that found favour with governors is to do with the reduction of demands on them. In general terms, there was a strong sense that the Government needed to reduce its expectations of what governors could reasonably manage:

I think that they [*DfES*] have a totally unreal view ... of how the governing bodies can work. I mean they do seem to think that you are (a) able, (b) have the time and (c) wish to manage what goes on in schools.  
(Governor, South Cityborough)

In particular, there was a sense that some managerial tasks – detailed performance monitoring, for instance, or arbitrating on pay and promotion – might be better carried out by some other body, such as the local authority. At the very least, governors felt that they needed stronger technical support, perhaps through a local authority clerking service that is proactive and advisory rather than simply administrative, or through some sort of paid consultancy service. An alternative to this is some sharing of expertise across governing bodies. We came across examples of experienced governors in one school being invited by the local authority to join other governing bodies that were in difficulties. Another suggestion was that there should be semi-professional chairs who could be shared between governing bodies. Overall, governors were keen that they should be enabled to make their contribution as 'laypeople', without being overburdened by what they saw as inappropriately technical tasks.

It is not difficult to envisage a package of initiatives at national and local level that could put in place strategies such as these. Indeed, from time to time, DfES and

other organisations come up with just such proposals (see, for instance, Barber *et al.*, 1995/2003; Bird, 2003; Ofsted, 2001). However, there are barriers at both of these levels that would need to be overcome. Nationally, as we have seen, large parts of education policy are driven by the desire to create increasingly ‘independent’ schools, delivering complex agendas, but remaining focused on the continuous improvement of standards of achievement. This in turn implies ever-increasing demands on governing bodies in terms both of time and expertise. If governing bodies in disadvantaged areas are to cope, either this whole approach will need to be rethought or more radical approaches to capacity building than those suggested here will need to be adopted. Simply ploughing ahead with education reform and hoping that governing bodies will keep up does not seem like a realistic option.

Similarly, at local level, we were struck by the marginal position occupied by governor support services. There was some variability in this and services were often valued by governing bodies. However, it was clear that these services have limited resources to deploy, are not well connected to other parts of the local authority concerned with community issues and are largely preoccupied with delivering government-mandated training. We were told by some governors that local authorities are under such pressure to deliver improved standards in their schools that support for school governance is starved of attention and resource. At both national and local level, therefore, it appears that the governance is something of an afterthought, despite the increasing demands that governors face.

### ***Structural change***

There is a case, therefore, for suggesting that any reform of school governance might have to address more structural issues. In particular, the proposition that every school should have its own governing body – even where governors are hard to recruit and where, in some cases, there may be as many governors as teaching staff – seems, on the face of it, bizarre. This is particularly the case given that the majority of schools continue to be the responsibility of democratically constituted local authorities – however weakened – and that all schools work within prescriptive frameworks set down by a democratic national government.

One option, therefore, is simply to abandon the notion of governing bodies and let local authorities or some government agency set up for the purpose get on with running schools. This is, of course, an idea that is out of tune with the recent direction taken by government policy, both in terms of encouraging the ‘independence’ of schools and of developing a ‘new localism’. It also proved to be out of tune with the views of current governors. By and large, they felt that, if local perspectives and



values matter, then so too does local governance. However, there are, as we have seen, real doubts over how authentically 'local' governing bodies are. Moreover, it is difficult to see that local perspectives – as opposed to up-close monitoring – matter if the role of governing bodies is understood primarily through a managerial lens. The abandonment of governing bodies is, therefore, not quite so out of the question as governors' responses might suggest.

There are, however, a number of halfway houses between the current system and complete abolition. The idea of shared governors or shared chairs, which we floated in the previous section, is only one step away from the idea of sharing governing bodies across a group of schools. Federated schools exist currently, of course, and it is not difficult to envisage an experienced, committed – and perhaps paid – core of governors taking responsibility for a group of schools, perhaps with supplementary school-specific membership for particular purposes. The move towards district governance of child, family and community services in North Millington indicates one way in which 'super' governing bodies might be created while still retaining essentially local perspectives. As some of our respondents there suggested, such a move might see governors well placed to address shared issues and develop shared agendas around Every Child Matters and area regeneration. This might be particularly important in areas of disadvantage. However, as respondents also pointed out, this area-based approach sits uneasily with a standards agenda that remains highly school-focused and with the continued pressure on schools to compete for students.

### ***Radical alternatives***

Finally, it might be worth considering some alternatives that are radical in two senses. First, like some of those we have just discussed, they would require significant levels of structural change. Second, and more important, they would require a major rethinking of the roles and purposes of governing bodies in a wider political context.

It struck us forcibly in our study that school governance exists in a somewhat hermetically sealed world, divorced not so much from party politics as from other forms of community politics in which different views and interests struggle with each other. While we had expected that some governing bodies would work through consensus and mutual support, we thought that others – particularly, perhaps, in the turbulent communities of London – would be politicised in this sense and linked closely to forms of community activism. As we have seen, however, this is far from the case and most governing bodies, wherever they are, proceed through consensus in pursuit of some notion of the common interest of the school. In many ways, this is no bad thing. When we confronted governors with our perceptions of the self-

contained nature of their worlds, they cited examples of governing bodies – and therefore schools – that had become paralysed when conflict got out of hand. It was important, we were told, that governors were able to work with each other and with the head, in order to ‘get things done’.

However, some also indicated that their apolitical character could not be separated from the overall lack of political capacity within local communities. One response to this state of affairs might be to leave well alone, accept that governing bodies in disadvantaged areas will never be highly politicised and let them get on with serving the interests of their schools as they see them. Another response, however, might be to link school governance to the more activist elements of the ‘new localism’ agenda. This would mean seeing them as arenas within which local people could participate meaningfully in decision making about matters that affected their lives. It would involve, at the very least, a much more proactive approach to recruitment and retention, building on the sorts of initiatives we saw in South Cityborough for securing the involvement of marginalised groups. It would almost certainly involve some restructuring of the role of governing bodies to remove the more technical aspects of their role and/or to increase the level of technical support to which they have access. Finally, it might also involve central government in increasing those aspects of policy that are delegated to the local level and resisting even more resolutely the temptation to micro-manage from Whitehall. Only in this way would governing bodies have the sort of scope for decision making that could make them appear as something more than the local implementers of centrally devised policy.

Given the culture of school governance in England, such a move seems improbable. Under successive governments, control of schooling has passed from the local to the national level, while issues in curriculum, pedagogy and school management have become increasingly professionalised. However, this is not necessarily the case in other countries. In the USA, for instance, disenchantment with the problems of public schools in the inner cities has led to growing calls for community groups and members to play a fuller role in governance, by organising themselves to put political pressure on established decision makers or by taking direct control of local schools (see, for instance, Anyon, 2005; Lipman, 2004; Mirón and St John, 2003; Schwebel, 2003). Such an approach is essentially conflictual, based on the assumption that political confrontation of one sort or another is necessary to persuade or force established decision makers to respond to the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

However, it may be that more consensual models are available in countries where there have been longer-lasting and more established efforts to raise the profile of education at local level and develop a sense of community ownership of local schools



(see, for instance, the account of community involvement in Denmark in Moss *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, disadvantaged areas in England currently offer significant opportunities for community involvement in decision making through local strategic partnerships, foundation trusts, primary care trusts and neighbourhood management initiatives, even if some of these are fraught with difficulties. The principle of decision making at the level of local stakeholders as well as of elected local councils is, in other words, well established. What we call here ‘radical’ alternatives, therefore, might mean no more than taking the implementation of this principle seriously.

## **Where next?**

It is our contention that, as the school system has changed radically in recent decades, questions about school governance have been something of an afterthought. So, as the relationship between schools and local authorities has weakened, essentially unreformed governing bodies have been asked to take on additional responsibilities. As the focus of national policy has shifted to standards, governors have been asked to take on a high-stakes role in performance management. Now, as schools are encouraged to form partnerships with external organisations, those same governing bodies are being asked to become the forum in which these new relationships are worked out. All of this is testimony to the adaptability of governing bodies and the pervasive sense that, for all their problems, they make a valuable contribution to their schools. However, it is also testimony to the reluctance of the English school system to think deeply about what governance means and how best it might be undertaken in a rapidly changing situation.

The options for change we have outlined above are not simply alternative ways of reaching the same goal. They cannot, we suggest, properly be evaluated without some kind of deeper reconsideration of more fundamental questions about governance. These are questions about the sort of school governance we want and what we want governance for. They are connected to questions about how we define quality in education and who has the right to formulate such definitions, about the sort of democracy we want and about what democratic participation means in areas where large parts of the population appear alienated from traditional democratic processes.

It seems to us that it would be equally mistaken, either simply to shore up the current system or to plunge into radical reform, without first giving proper consideration to these questions. Currently, we can find little evidence of any widespread debate among policy makers and professionals – let alone among the public at large – about

these matters. Yet a debate of this kind is long overdue and urgently needed. If our report can play some part in stimulating such a debate, it will have served its purpose.

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# Appendix: Further detail on research methods

## Study design

As explained in the body of the report, the study was designed in the form of linked case studies of areas of disadvantage and the schools serving those areas. Generalisation from the cases was facilitated by:

- a review of the relevant research and policy literature
- interviews with key informants able to offer an overview of policy in this field
- a virtual seminar with researchers in other parts of the UK.

## Sample selection

Initially, four local authority areas were identified on the basis that they were known to contain areas of significant disadvantage, but that they offered contrasts in terms of region, local authority type and population characteristics (particularly, ethnicity). Within each authority, key informants (normally, the head of governor support services) were approached and invited to participate in the study. They were then asked, with relevant colleagues, to identify smaller areas where the study might be located and that were characterised by disadvantage (as indicated, for instance, by their position on indices of deprivation). Because we were interested, among other things, in exploring the relationship between communities and school governing bodies, we asked that the areas should be defined as the location for more-or-less coherent 'lived' communities rather than in terms of administrative boundaries. There was some negotiation with our local authority informants as we sought to identify areas that met our criteria but that also offered us a diversity of demographic, economic and geographical (e.g. rural/urban) context across the study as a whole.

Once the areas were selected, we asked our local authority informants to identify those schools (up to six) that served the majority of local children. We asked them to act as intermediaries in approaching schools, on the grounds that they could offer

reassurance to potential participants that the study would not impose unnecessary burdens on them, nor damage what might be delicate relationships with local communities. Officers in all four areas made initial contact with schools. All of those approached in three of the areas agreed to take part. In the fourth area, we were unable to recruit sufficient schools to justify a full area study.

As a means of making an initial (albeit crude) characterisation of the school sample, we collected information from each school on the number on roll, the percentage of the student population known to be entitled to free school meals (FSM), the percentage identified as having English as an additional language (EAL) and the percentage achieving level 4 (L4) in the end of key stage 2 (KS2) assessments (for primary schools) or five A\*–C equivalents in the end of key stage 4 (KS4) examinations (for secondary schools). This information is summarised in Table A1. By way of comparison, in 2005:

- 16.9 per cent of children in primary schools and 14 per cent of those in secondary schools were eligible for free school meals (National Statistics, 2005b)
- 11.6 per cent of children in primary schools and 9 per cent of children in secondary schools had English as an additional language (National Statistics, 2005b)
- 79 per cent of children taking the end of key stage 2 assessments achieved level 4 or above in English (National Statistics, 2005a)
- 56.3 per cent of students gained A\*–C grades at GCSE or equivalent (National Statistics, 2006).

Although the sample of schools is varied in terms of school phase, size and student population, it is less varied in terms of school type. This is partly because we did not seek to recruit special schools, since they tend not to relate to geographical communities in the way that mainstream schools do. However, as it happens, there were no academies in our case study areas and only one faith school (Primary I). In other words, nearly all of our sample schools were community schools.

**Table A1 The sample of schools**

School	No. on roll	% FSM	% EAL	% L4 + Eng. (KS2) or 5 A*-C (KS4)
<i>North Millington</i>				
Primary A	430	60	3	87
Primary B	309	29	1.5	73
Primary C	320	53	1.3	75
Secondary D	1,483	38	15	42
<i>East Moorfield</i>				
Primary E	172	60	0	52
Primary F	129	33.9	0	50
Primary G	545	27.7	0	81
Primary H	169	43	0.7	65
Primary I	231	25.5	0	79
Secondary J	1,036	29	0	30
<i>South Cityborough</i>				
Primary K	420	53	65	77
Primary L	250	64	70	62
Secondary M	1,092	59	50	40
Secondary N	998	56	81	29

## Data collection

From our initial research questions, we designed a protocol to guide our fieldwork and analysis of data. The protocol specified in detail the issues we wished to address and the types of data we aimed to collect in order to do so. It was used as the basis for interview schedules and to guide the writing up of cases, and included two main sections – one concerned with contextual information and the other with the issues at the core of the study.

After we had selected the schools, we interviewed three to seven governors in each of them, including the chair of governors and head teacher. In the course of these discussions we learned about issues, problems and events locally that seemed to illuminate our questions in a particularly clear way. We therefore followed up these ‘critical incidents’ in greater detail, using them as a way to identify and talk to other people who could provide a useful perspective on them. Critical incidents included:

- the decision to accept a PFI rebuild of a school
- a contentious school amalgamation
- managing relationships with Sure Start
- a proposal to provide family planning advice in a secondary school.



Interviews were carried out between April and December 2005. In total, we interviewed 12 parent governors, 19 local authority governors, 15 community governors, and 25 staff governors (including heads), together with two foundation governors in the faith school. While governors were appointed or elected to serve in a particular capacity, in a number of cases they were able to speak from several perspectives. For example, some community and staff governors were also parents of children in the schools where they were governors.

Given the resources available to us, we concentrated our interviewing on governors themselves. In order to set governors' views in a wider perspective, however, we also interviewed: a representative of the local authority governor support service in each area; seven other local authority officers involved in education, regeneration or community development; two business representatives; eight community representatives (including parents and students); and one governor representative.

We collected documentation that could provide contextual information about the case study areas and individual schools, including:

- governor support services training programmes
- local authority directors' reports to governors
- local community strategy papers
- local authority analyses of deprivation statistics
- voluntary and community sector reports.

At school level, contextual information was drawn from Ofsted inspection and PANDA reports, and school prospectuses. Information about the composition of governing bodies was provided from school records and pro formas circulated to governors by the research team.

## **Data analysis**

Analysis was a staged process using the protocol as our starting point. Data from interviews were analysed in relation to its main and sub-questions, and case studies of individual schools written using these to provide a structure. Case studies of individual schools formed the basis of area accounts, using the same structure, and

drawing out similarities and differences between schools. Comparison of these three area case studies formed the basis for the final report.

### **Validation and generalisation**

Emerging findings were validated in the following ways.

- We discussed findings with an advisory group of researchers and decision makers in the field.
- We held feedback events in each of the three areas for all participants in the study, where we presented our emerging findings and invited comments.
- We hosted a (virtual) seminar with researchers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in which they were invited to comment on our emerging findings and, particularly, discuss their generalisability to non-English contexts.
- We undertook ten 'policy interviews' with representatives of governor organisations, teacher organisations, and civil servants and representatives of government agencies, where we discussed the generalisability of our findings and their implications for policy regarding school governance.

The information gleaned from these activities is not reported directly, but underlies our discussion of findings and the implications for future policy.